41.

CHAPTER IV

WE were awakened shortly after dawn by the roaring of the surf and, after a wash down with ice-cold well water in the courtyard, I strolled through the village to get a glimpse of the mountains. Pink in the first flush of morning light, Jebel Kawa, the highest peak in the range, rose in fluted folds from a turquoise sea. A brisk westerly wind blew across the desert, and the palm fronds nodded violently, like feathers in the bonnets of agitated old ladies. Streaks of butterfly blue glinted between the leaves—the bright underwings of the jays. Behind the low plaster wall of a merchant's summer house the plum trees were sprouting into baby green, and tortoise-shell butterflies hovered lazily in the increasing radiance of sunlight.

On my return to the Khan Sahib's house I found Sparkes smoking a cigarette in the courtyard. Ali had sent a car with a towrope and had brought him back at midnight, but the ropes had broken several times and we were abed before he reached the village. Sparkes showed me a grey lizard he had brought back, a fine specimen measuring four feet from nose to tail, which he gave to one of the servants to cook for their dinner. Breakfast was a simple meal of fruit, coffee and dates rolled in chipatties; being ravenous we did it justice. The Arabs are sparing eaters, and only consume large quantities of food at their ceremonial feasts or when entertaining guests, and we found that when in the desert it was easy to accustom oneself to their habits.

After a pipe and a stroll along the foreshore, we were joined by the Khan Sahib, resplendent in a gold-brocaded turban and brown silk *abbas*, and he suggested that we should make a call on Sheikh Sultan bin Salim, ruler of Ras-al-Khaimah The Khan Sahib, who is a handsome man of sixty-five, six feet tall, broad-shouldered and inclined to stoutness, has the fair skin of the Persian or Bedouin, expressive hands, and the gracious manners of an aristocrat. With his bushy black eyebrows and grey toothbrush moustache, he could easily be mistaken for an Italian nobleman. He belongs to a very ancient Arab family, and his father was British Resident at Sharjah at the beginning of the century.

[Shi'hou]

563 The situation was getting a little out of hand. I seized Stanton
609 by the arm and urged him back towards the crevice up which we had come. Hardly had we reached the end of the valley when a dozen emaciated Arabs, with long beards, and rifles in their hands, suddenly appeared from behind a row of neam trees. They were slowly moving towards the entrance to the crevice, from which they must have watched us emerge, intent on cutting off our retreat. Before we could draw our revolvers one of them had fired his rifle, the bullet striking the rock cliff behind us.

Stanton yelled and dashed towards a hole in the rocks. We ran like hares to the cave, bullets spattering the rocks all round us, and reached the entrance just in time. We held a brief council of war and decided that, with a dozen rounds each, we could just about hold our own, since the cave was a natural fort and was better suited for defence than for attack. To our consternation the twelve *Shi'hou* were soon joined by about twenty more armed men who began to creep towards our hiding place. We realized that it was useless to try and shoot our way out, and replacing our
• 142 revolvers in their holsters, awaited the outcome. The *Shi'hou*, who by now stood outside the cave yelling and gesticulating with their rifles, were an extraordinary-looking lot. Shorter than the average Arab, they had a much wilder look, with long hair and beards.
[411] Each man carried a curious little axe, no bigger than a hammer, attached to a long pole. Their faces were rounder and much less Semitic than the Arabs', and of a reddish-brown colour. A few strips of cotton saved them from complete nudity, and their arms and legs were covered with silver rings.

563 The only member of the tribe who wore a head-dress—a strip
609 of dirty white cloth worn in the manner of a turban—stepped forward and spoke to us in the strange dialect of his tribe. I knew some Arabic and recognized one word which, roughly translated, meant 'Come out'. As we left the cave and stood before him they yelled more wildly than before, no doubt demanding our blood as the price of violating the sanctity of their hills. The headman silenced them and began to jabber at us violently, gesticulating fiercely with his hands. After five minutes of this haranguing, he seemed to realize that we did not understand him and glared at us impatiently.

486 'What about the *ghuli chit*?' Stanton whispered in my ear, and
563 I suddenly remembered the pass which the Sheikh of Sharjah had provided me with. This was a piece of paper, headed with the

like black crows as, without a vestige of matronly shame, they relieve themselves. He who would pursue one of these would be a brave and a needy man, in all conscience.

In Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the women are much fairer in colouring and altogether more civilized by Western standards, especially among the merchant and middle classes: although in Iraq one also finds one of the most primitive peoples in the world, the fierce Marsh Arabs, who live in stilted huts in the middle of a swamp. In Baghdad or Basrah you may find female beauty to vie with Cleopatra's, whilst among the Bedouins I have seen girls of regal countenance and poise. Among the women of the Oman tribes, however, the features are simian rather than Semitic, although here and there one sees a dark-eyed beauty with a smooth copper skin and slim ankles. Their make-up would give Elizabeth Arden a few ideas and probably a heart attack. Belladonna and the dye obtained from a desert shrub is poured into the eyes to make them unnaturally bright and large, and the lashes are painted with a dark blue liquid. Lips and the inside of their hands are also stained with henna or some red dye, and the hair is oiled and screwed tightly back from the head.

Europeans have not infrequently married into Arab families, but the women usually came from Bedouin or northern tribes and were fairly civilized. One old man I know, who originally came from Liverpool, married a Syrian woman and had several fine sons by her. At one time a sailor on the old sailing ships, he went to America for several years, later voyaging to Arabia, where he joined a band of Bedouins and remained with them in the desert for several years. I have heard that he even took part in their expeditions. They accepted him as one of themselves and, burned by the desert sun, he came to look more like an Arab than an Englishman. Eventually he discarded Western life and associations altogether, embraced the Islamic faith, and made the pilgrimage to Mecca. 'Haji' Williamson, now a respectable member of the Bahrain community, is a well-known character in the Gulf.

My duties as Manager were fairly simple ones, requiring more alertness of mind and tact in liaising with my neighbours than concentrated effort. Office routine became a habit, easy to one who had undertaken the duties of adjutant and administrative officer in the R.A.F., and in preparing my correspondence and monthly reports to headquarters I was assisted by an efficient and very

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

race into round-headed or long-headed types, Alpine or Mediterranean. One can find a dolchycephalic head in any part of China and match it with a hundred heads in India, Arabia, France, Zululand or England.

My own theory, and it is as good as that advanced by Bertram Thomas or any other Arabian traveller, is that there is not one Arab race, but many Arab races. The inhabitant of Arabia may be termed an Arabian for geographical purposes, but ethnologically he may belong to the African race, the Persian or Iraqi race, or even the Turkestan race. Generally speaking, what is known as the true Arab is a Semite whose ancestors inhabited the Syrian and Palestinian deserts; some settled in Arabia proper, migrating as far south as the Gulf, whilst others trekked across Egypt and made their home as far west as the Atlas mountains, calling themselves Berbers and Senussi.

The tribes of Oman, Aden and the Hadramaut are undoubtedly of partial Semitic ancestry, but there is strong evidence in their black, curly hair, heavier noses, dark-brown eyes and negritic lips of African origins. Apart from the vast slave traffic which was a feature of Arab economic life up to the late nineteenth century, trading between the African coast and southern Arabia was at one time the main source of prosperity and enabled the sheikhs to build their towns, harbours and pearling fleets.

In the days of Arab power, the southern sheikhs ruled the seas from Bombay to Madagascar; Zanzibar was captured by the ancestors of the present ruler of Muscat, and the sultan who rules Zanzibar to-day is a descendant of the same Saiyed family. It is evident that with this close connexion between southern Arabia and East Africa, which continued uninterrupted for many centuries, a widespread inflow of negro blood must have occurred. Arabs intermarried with their slaves, African merchants married Arab women, and only the upper and princely classes, as well as the nomadic desert tribes who did no trading, were able to preserve their Semitic purity of race. It is also quite probable that some of the aboriginal tribes or earliest settlers of Oman and the Hadramaut originally came over from the African continent.

The Arabs, like many other races priding themselves on their breeding are, in reality, by no means pure-bred; but in their case their racial pride and extraordinary tenacity of tradition has enabled them to escape the usual effects of a dilution of the national stock.

The pure-blooded Bedouin, the gypsy of the desert, whom

coco-nut trees grow down to the shore on either side of the creek, on the southern side of which is a palm-mat 'summer palace' belonging to the Sheikh of Ras-al-Khaimah, now used to house a discarded wife. The town is divided by the creek into two sections—Dubai proper, where the merchants and wealthier classes live, and Dera, the fishermen's quarter. We made for the latter and moored alongside a primitive wooden jetty beside which large pearling dhows were undergoing a careen.

The streets of Dera are filthy in the extreme, the inhabitants living in hovels roofed with palm-matting supported by wooden joists. The only presentable house was the coral and mortar residence of Ali, the Anglo-Persian Company's agent in Dubai; we stopped here for a few minutes and had a cup of tea made with condensed milk. The Arabs, whose chief occupation is pearl diving, fishing, shipbuilding and wool-weaving, were ragged and unkempt; many had sores on their legs and arms, and appeared to be suffering from eye infections. Many of the children were badly pock-marked. The stench of refuse, stale fish, camel dung and rotting food was unbearable, and attracted clouds of flies.

One noticed a variety of racial types. The Omani Arabs predominated, but one saw also fair-skinned Persians, Bedouins, Sunussi, and negroid types who were obviously ex-slaves. Many of the Arabs, thin-bearded men with hawk-like noses, looked more villainous than any I have seen. We strolled through the bazaar, but the shops were small and untidy and displayed goods of inferior quality. In several of the shops I noticed ancient iron safes, gaudily painted, which were of English manufacture and had obviously been taken from merchantmen by the pirates. There is little doubt that most of the inhabitants of Dera, a vicious, sullen crowd, would gladly have returned to piracy had they been given half a chance. In contrast to their cruel, sardonic faces around us, I was struck by the beauty of some of the children who swarmed at our side, feeling our clothes and touching our hands. A little girl of nine or ten attracted my attention; her perfectly formed features, luminous brown eyes and Grecian lips made me sigh for a pencil and sketchbook. The little boys were delightful creatures too, with laughing eyes and white, even teeth.

The streets were extremely dark, with high walls on one side and palm-matting completely covering them like a roof, whilst the 'road' was a quagmire of mud and camel dung. Six shops out of every ten exhibited panniers of dried fruits and cereals, figs,